

# On the Rack

By F. Woodward Neele

**T**HE day was cold and the station draughty. Clarissa Fagg, a mature damsel of sixteen, who prided herself upon her ability as a nursemaid, cast her eye around in search of further wrappings for the baby—already half mummified.

To say she cast her eye is unfair. Nature had already cast it for her. At any rate, she fixed it on the arch of the station roof, and at the same time laid her hand on her mistress's traveling-rug, which was lying on a trunk a little behind her on the right-hand side.

In this rug she swathed the sleeping baby, till only the expert eye of a mother could have distinguished him from a bundle of rugs.

Outside the station, two hansoms, with clattering horses and silent wheels, had just discharged their respective fares. These were strangers to one another, but each told the porter to label his luggage to C—, so it was piled on the same trolley.

The porter said there was a through coach to C—, and led the way with the luggage. For two single men there was a good amount of it—hat boxes, gun cases, golf clubs, rugs and portmanteaux, and one had a cycle.

Charlie Soper was very tall, very young, and very fair. Major Slimm was six feet two in his socks, and at least four feet around; and the two, one wheeling his machine, and the porter with the traps, made quite an imposing procession. At any rate, they impressed Clarissa Fagg, who gaped upon them with her mouth and brought up in the rear admiringly.

The porter was a man who knew his work. He found a "1st smoking" for the gentlemen, and hauled the trolley alongside then made a show of feeling the footwarmers, and went running down the platform in search of hot ones.

It was at this precise moment that an old woman, hurrying for a train, slipped and fell with her basket of oranges. The fruit rolled in all directions, and Clarissa, whose heart was in the right place, however her eye may have erred from the straight path, popped the baby on the trolley, while she helped the old lady to her feet and dived after her oranges.

So it came to pass that she was out of earshot when Charlie Soper said, "Put the small things in here, porter, and be careful of the rugs," and before the last orange was back in the basket the trolley had been whisked to a distant van, and the baby had become the joint possession of Mr. Soper and Major Slimm. But the baby on the rack was not more unconscious than those two gentlemen.

"It's a woman," said the Major, popping his head out as Charlie's came in, "and she seems to be in hysterics."

He watched till the platform glided out of sight, then settled into his seat and retired behind a newspaper. In a few minutes the paper dropped onto his knee and the Major slept.

Charlie lowered his paper when he saw the other man fairly off, and deliberately stepped into a dreamland of his own, along a path he had trodden more and more frequently of late, and where wandered hand in hand with Nellie Seymour.

Oh! these day-dreams! Sweeter, rosier, more to our fancy than those that come by night, but as fleeting as elusive, and as vain!

As Charlie pulled at his pipe he wondered how he dared to dream that his dream might come true. He recalled the past. The never-to-be-forgotten day when he first made her acquaintance, and her father's, on that homeward voyage. The long, lazy days that followed, when they sat together, walked together, and talked—oh! talked endlessly, lightly, seriously, talked of things great, and of things small, till the night would creep on, and the stars come out, and a silence would fall between them, which to him, at

any rate, was throbbing with things unutterable. But to her—ah! that was it! Who could tell of what she was thinking?

And then the nights when they danced together, or she sang! . . . And in town, had they not met on the same sweetly familiar footing? Always such good friends—that was the worst of it—if she were not so horribly, frankly friendly! How could a man tell, when a girl looked at him so straight, so brightly, with such speaking eyes that said—nothing? Well, there was but one way to test her real thoughts and that was to throw himself at her feet. He was going down now to her old country home for the first time, and let the chances but offer he would seize upon it.

He had brought for her a very precious bit of china—Nellie adored china—carefully packed in shavings in its wooden case, and rolled for greater safety in his rug. When they were alone he would give it to her and then, if he could, if he only dared—

Charlie fell to earth with a crash as his fellow-traveler awoke with a stifled snort. The Major was the first to collect his thoughts.

"Are we getting near C—?" he asked.

Charlie looked at his watch. "Ten minutes more ought to see us in," he said.

"Do you know the country around here at all?" continued the Major, wideawake now and inclined to chat.

"Very slightly," said Charlie; "I have only passed through in going north."

"Oh," said Major Slimm, "then you will not know the whereabouts of Benton Manor. I am going—"

"Benton Manor?" interposed Charlie; "are you going there? That's rather funny, for I'm going there myself."

"Very far off," laughed Major Slimm. "Nice people, the Seymours. You know them well, I dare say?"

people," moralized the Major, "I met the old man last summer in the Highlands. He was staying with some friends of my friends. I saw a good bit of him then, and never saw him again till I ran against him in town last week. Said he had some good shooting down here, and offered me a day or two." Charlie wondered if he had met Nellie, and then wondered how to ask the question. It was very simple, but he could not say it. He framed a sentence and voiced it inwardly to see how it sounded. The longer he waited the harder it was to say.

"Have you met Miss Seymour at all?"

It came out quite suddenly before he realized he was speaking.

"Yes, several times. She was with her father. A charming girl," said the Major, and repeated reflectively, and with unction—"a very charming girl."

"He does admire her," thought Charlie. "The brute." A huge dislike of the Major filled his breast. He hated him.

"Here's our station," said the Major, pitching his cigar stump out of the window, serenely unconscious that the other man wanted to kick him.

A dog-cart was waiting for the two gentlemen. The man knew Charlie and touched his hat. "There's a cart down for the luggage, sir," he said.

"If you don't mind waiting a minute," said Charlie to the major, "I will send

a telegram. I quite forgot to leave my address for my letters to be forwarded." He went to the office, but returned immediately.

"Impossible to send any message," he reported. "The clerk says the instrument has been affected by a thunderstorm this morning and there's no communication with town at present." He sprang into the dog-cart, and in another moment was bowling along the smooth white road with Major Slimm, while the porter piled the luggage onto the cart.

One! two! three! four! in went the things. A bundle of rugs, not strapped, seemed in danger of falling to pieces. The porter tucked one loose end in, then looked closer, started, and exclaimed:

"Oh, heavens! a baby!"

"A what?" said the groom, coming around from the horse's head. The porter showed him a glimpse of yellow curls just inside of one end of the bundle. The groom whistled.

"How'd it get there?"

"It's a rum thing to find in any gent's luggage," said the porter; "but it's there right enough, just as I took it out of the carriage, and I'm not going to interfere."

"Then am I to take it up to the Manor?" asked the groom.

"Of course," said the porter; "taint your business to ask about it, and taint mine. Who-ever it is, it ain't my kid, and I ain't going to get it shoved onto me. I've six of my own." He looked around. There was no one about. "There's no one seen it but you and me. If you takes my advise you'll shut your mouth, same as me. I cleared that bundle out of the carriage along of the other things, and I'm bloomin' sorry I ever looked inside it."

"It's a rum go," said the groom, "but I ain't meaning to adopt of it, so we'll both keep it dark."

The porter tucked the baby up, and found it a secure position among the other luggage, and watched the cart out of sight.

And the baby still slept profoundly. Two miles of jolting up to the Manor failed to disturb it, and it was carried up with the other things into the bachelor's quarters at Benton Manor, where it lay snugly in a corner of Charlie Soper's room—a Human Bomb.

When Charlie came up to dress he was in high feather. Nellie had smiled upon him, had blushed when they met. He almost fancied she had returned the pressure of his hand and her fingers had certainly come into contact with his own in the passing of a teacup. Moreover, she appeared indifferent to Major Slimm's very apparent admiration.

He was food for reflection, for self-congratulation and complacency; they fed freely and waxed fat.

Charlie's surroundings ministered to his mood. The bright firelight played on the polished furniture, a couple of lamps threw a more reliable light, and in their mellow glow he preened himself before the long cheval-glass.

He twisted his mustache, first up, then down, and critically noted each effect. He smoothed his glossy hair with the palm of his hand. Had he been the Major he would have used a hand-mirror at this stage, and anxiously scanned the back of his head—but Charlie's thatch was thick and crisp, and no crown as yet looked out like a rock at low water.

Mr. Soper's attention passed from his head to his necktie. He lengthened the bows fastidiously, pulled his coat, and craned to see the back effect!—turned sideways to mark the beautiful line in the fall of his trouser leg—then suddenly looked at his watch, and found he had only twenty minutes before dinner.

He made a great speed with his toilet, and in fifteen minutes was going through a similar pantomime in his dress suit.



"As Charlie pulled at his pipe he wondered how he dared to dream that his dream might come true."

"Fairly well," said Charlie, and eyed his companion. Why was this fellow going to Seymour's? Was he a rival? The yellow tiger in the lover was stirred.

"Curious how one runs against

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